

MORTUARY RITES

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says that "they die calm and without apprehension." The two chief concerns of a man who knows he is about to die are: 763

(a) That his mortuary rites should be properly carried out. These he will often have partly performed already himself, and then he has no fear that his relatives will omit their part in sacrificing the necessary pigs.

(b) The regulation of his debts. Owing to the extremely complicated system of exchange and borrowing, there is no moment in a man's life when all the pigs in his possession are actually his own, or, conversely, when none of his own pigs have been lent to some relative or other. Such transactions, when they overstep a man's lifetime, as often they do, land his successors in disputes and difficulties from which they never fully disentangle themselves. For this reason, and because it is a man's pride to be recognised as a successful and wealthy man, who knows just where all his wealth is, and who owes no man what he cannot repay, one of a dying man's main concerns is to leave all his affairs publicly in order. He therefore sends out cycas-leaf tallies, on which the fronds on the left-hand side are plucked off so as to indicate his debts, and those on the right-hand the number and grade of pigs which he is owed. Debtors and creditors arrive, the former with pigs which they themselves have probably borrowed in order to pay back their debt, and a general settlement is made—that is to say, if the dead man is solvent. If he is not, his relatives strain every nerve to make him so. Disputes, however, not infrequently arise.¹ 426 [211]

¹ Godefroy recounts a modern case in point.

"Melte-sas died when he was about 65 years old. During his youth he had worked in Australia, in Queensland. When he came back to Vao, the old men pointed out to him how behindhand he was compared with those of his own age, who had already attained high rank by the sacrifice of large numbers of tusked boars. . . . He forthwith set about making up for lost time. Strong and courageous, he succeeded in amassing enough money, by the sale of copra, to obtain for himself an honourable place in clan debates. Driven by ambition, he wished to attain the rank of Melteg-amu. In order to reach this, he was compelled to borrow large numbers of tusked boars which he had been unable to repay. When he showed signs of dying, that is to say for the week preceding his death, all his creditors came to his house and, sitting squarely before him, reminded him of his debts. One put in a claim for three "bouar" [bo-wars—re-entrant-tusker] each worth £12: another pointed out that he had never repaid him the £10 of English money advanced to him for the purpose of prosecuting some rite: a third bitterly regretted having lent him four large pigs which had since inexplicably disappeared from circulation: lastly, two young braggarts loudly asserted that he had never properly paid for his last wife, and that they therefore claimed his last child, a young girl.

"To all these claimants the wretched Melte-sas replied by uttering an indisputable truth, namely that he was ruined, snowed under by debts owing to the downright bad faith of friends and enemies alike. He saw but one way in which they might recover at least part of what was justly owing to them; his son . . . would take service on a [white man's] trading-vessel and his wages would serve to pay off his father's debts. . . ."

On the other hand:

"Sum-tamat died as he had lived, swindling both relatives and friends. For twenty

possessed of an extremely complex social organization by means of which each island is divided asymmetrically into nameless halves, each rivalling the other and ready at any moment to develop into two hostile groups. In the island of Vao, which preserves the oldest form of social organization in the group, one-half comprises one double village, and the other half two double villages. As with the two halves of the island, so each of the two double villages in the larger half is apt to become hostile to the other, as also is each single village within the unit of the double village. Each single village is further subdivided into two divisions called "Sides of the Stone," which in turn are divided into two family groups, each of which is again subdivided into two smaller family groups. Each village possesses a dancing-ground and central village lodge called *ghamal* where public business is carried on, business concerning individual joint-families being carried on in family lodges called *na-tamp* closely associated with the graves of the ancestral dead. Each of the groups in the progressive bisection of the community is apt to become hostile to its opposing group. On the other hand, each pair of groups combines in ritual activities leading to cohesion, or in the face of a common foe. In every case, whether in matters affecting ritual cooperation or warlike preparation, whether in family affairs or in affairs affecting the whole island, the final decision depends on an informed public opinion led by the older members of the group in conclave. Similar social groupings, modified by a more recent intrusive culture from the Malekulan mainland, obtain in the remaining islands of the group. In all the islands descent is predominantly patrilineal, marriage being regulated along strictly exogamous lines as between patrilineal groups varying in size from the single village to (in the case of Wala) the entire island, as well as matrilineally between relatives tracing common descent extending to three generations backward on the mother's side. Marriages, equally strictly regulated, also occur (and in the island of Wala necessarily do occur) with members of mainland villages and with members of other islands within the ethnic group, whose dialects are known to one another in such a way that every native is acquainted with at least three and often more than three distinct languages.

This complex social organization and linguistic ability presuppose no mean intelligence, and are accompanied by, and intimately bound up with, a genealogical and historical sense unrivalled in Melanesia, to be compared only, so far as the Pacific is concerned, with that of the Polynesians, with whom these people have close cultural connections. On Atchin exact pedigrees, checked by various means, reach back for seventeen generations, and include detailed accounts of the doings of many of the figures appearing in them as well as the ancestry of the various inter-related joint-families which together build up the village organization.

These pedigrees are not only orally preserved. The natives' memories are also kept green by the numerous megalithic monuments which form their most striking memorial. It was the then barely known existence of such monuments, first published by Speiser (1913) that attracted the late

* This completely symmetrical arrangement occurs only in the Vao village of Petchul. Organization in the remaining villages has been slightly modified owing to influence from Atchin and elsewhere.

endless series of minor rites are performed, each involving the sacrifice of numerous tusked boars and an enormous expenditure of food for feasts. Each village performs its own rite in its own time, and the major rites attract guests from all other villages on the island, as well as from other islands and from the Malekulan mainland. There are numerous dance-cycles, frequently lasting all night, and finally, before the supreme sacrifice, for five days and nights on end. Each dance-cycle has its own songs, many of which commemorate the deeds of ancestors, and its peculiar gong-rhythms beaten on an orchestra of upright slit-gongs. Some of the songs are of surpassing beauty, and the gong-rhythms are so complicated that no European has yet been known to master them. Interspersed between the dance-cycles performed at stated intervals throughout the rite are a series of formal square dances and dramatic performances called *na-leng*,¹ many of which have become secularized, but some of which remain traditional and form a running commentary on the mythological background of the rite. This, as I hope to show in a forthcoming work, is none other than a dramatization of the Malekulan version of the journey of the dead, briefly described by me in a recent article (1934), which itself forms part of the mythology of megalithic peoples as far apart as the Nagas in Assam, the inhabitants of the Tamil country of Southern India, peoples of the Near East, of the Mediterranean littoral, and, in our own islands, of ancient Scotland, and in Scandinavia.

The bearers of this megalithic civilization were a maritime and river-loving people or peoples, the details of whose adventurous migrations yet remain to be worked out in detail—there have been at least two separate migrations of them into Malekula—but there can be little doubt that from Scandinavia to Malekula and beyond they have a common origin. One of the greatest interests to us therefore in Malekula is the fact that it is not impossible that, in the ritual of the *Maki* and in the beliefs associated with it, we may see a variant of one aspect at least of what some of our own forefathers, the megalith builders of Britain, did and thought. This rite is also one of fertility and of re-birth, each participant marking his assumption of new life by taking a new name, usually that of a maternal ancestor. The sacrifice of tusked boars is known on Atchin, both by precept and through historical tradition, to be a substitute for former human sacrifice, and those who make the highest sacrifice take oaths to keep the peace for varying periods, extending to three years, or, in the case of old men, a lifetime. Though cannibalism still exists, it is contrary to present *Maki* practice, but its close association with more ancient religious forms is still evident in that when an enemy is wounded, a dolmen, similar to that erected in the older *Maki* use, is hastily constructed in the bush, and the body is placed upon it and there ritually sacrificed, the victor thereupon taking a new name as in the *Maki* proper.

Though the wooden images of ancestors and hawks, and the roofs erected over the stone monuments rot, the stone themselves are never taken down, and remain as a memorial to those who sacrificed at them, whose stones they are henceforth said to be. I have shown elsewhere (1928) that monolith and wooden image combined represent an earlier form in which there was no

¹ See Mr. Harrison's reference to similar performances among the Big Nambas, p. 332.

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wooden image and the monolith itself was carved to represent the ancestral human form, the wooden image having been added only when the art of carving stone was lost, so that what was originally a stone statue became split into two parts, of which the portrait, being of wood, in time disappears, and the plain monolith only remains. Though in Atchin the ritual has become so elaborate as to have largely obscured its original significance, there can be no doubt that in its earlier forms, as still in South-West Bay, the monolith actually represented, and was deemed to be inhabited by, the ghosts of all those ancestors who had previously performed the rite, and, after death, the new sacrificer himself. Hence its importance as a memorial and in the preservation of genealogies and history. Many of the more important figures in Atchin history are thus commemorated, both by their stones and by the preservation of their graves. So strong is the association of ancestors with stones that in semi-mythical accounts they are frequently stated to have had the power to turn themselves into stone during life-time, or to have actually become stone when they died. This process has been carried yet further in the case of those figures associated with the mythology connected with the journey of the dead, who are now to be seen as natural coral blocks standing at various points on the coast along the path trodden by the ghosts of the dead on their way to their future home.

There is no space to do more than mention a few of the most important in the long list of ritual activities in this rich civilization: activities in connection with the belief in ancestors and rites of communion with them; the protracted mortuary ritual; initiation lasting nine months with an intensive period of thirty days in which continuous hoaxes are practised on the luckless novices; the operation of incision; rites connected with the consecration of the long-distance canoes capable of carrying thirty men on trading expeditions to other islands for as far as 80 miles over open sea; a special form of sex initiation performed on the distant island of Omba; the consecration of houses and of tusked boars; magic; their economic life, their fishing, gardening, and trading; their laws of copyright whereby nothing is given, but everything, such as songs, dances, variations in ritual, whole rites, magical formulae, designs for the carving of ancestor-images and of canoe figure-heads, details of house construction and decoration, and a hundred other aspects of their artistically rich culture, is sold by these intensely commercial people at high prices and with due ceremony from individual to individual, village to village, and island to island, thus constituting the framework for the dissemination and blending of endless variations of culture; history and tradition.

One other feature must be mentioned on account of its bearing on the coming of the whites. Mr. Harrison has already referred to the white-skinned, aquiline-nosed immigrants, who are said to have introduced the latest phases of megalithic culture into that area. On Atchin the equivalent culture-hero is a being called Ta-har, corresponding to the Polynesian Tanggaloa, Banks Islands Tagaro, and the Big Nambas Horo, regarded in Atchin as the benign creator, who is at once a stone and the moon, who made the islands and gave their inhabitants their languages, who arrived in a canoe and introduced the pig and the coconut to ten legendary petromorphic brothers standing on